

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Evidence for coal forest refugia in the seasonally dry Pennsylvanian tropical lowlands of the Illinois Basin, USA

### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Looy, Cindy V.; Stevenson, Robert A.; Van Hoof, Thomas B. and Mander, Luke (2014). Evidence for coal forest refugia in the seasonally dry Pennsylvanian tropical lowlands of the Illinois Basin, USA. PeerJ, 2, article no. e630.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 The Authors



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7717/peerj.630>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# Evidence for coal forest refugia in the seasonally dry Pennsylvanian tropical lowlands of the Illinois Basin, USA

Cindy V. Looy<sup>1</sup>, Robert A. Stevenson<sup>2</sup>, Thomas B. Van Hoof<sup>3</sup> and Luke Mander<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Integrative Biology and Museum of Paleontology, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Integrative Biology, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

<sup>3</sup> TNO-Geobiology, Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>4</sup> College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Exeter, Devon, UK

## ABSTRACT

The Moscovian plant macroflora at Cottage Grove southeastern Illinois, USA, is a key example of Pennsylvanian (323–299 Million years ago) dryland vegetation. There is currently no palynological data from the same stratigraphic horizons as the plant macrofossils, leaves and other vegetative and reproductive structures, at this locality. Consequently, reconstructions of the standing vegetation at Cottage Grove from these sediments lack the complementary information and a more regional perspective that can be provided by sporomorphs (prepollen, pollen, megaspores and spores). In order to provide this, we have analysed the composition of fossil sporomorph assemblages in two rock samples taken from macrofossil-bearing inter-coal shale at Cottage Grove. Our palynological data differ considerably in composition and in the dominance-diversity profile from the macrofossil vegetation at this locality. Walchian conifers and pteridosperms are common elements in the macroflora, but are absent in the sporomorph assemblages. Conversely, the sporomorph assemblages at Cottage Grove comprise 17 spore taxa (~16% and ~63% of the total assemblages) that are known from the lycopsid orders Isoetales, Lepidodendrales and Selaginallales, while Cottage Grove's macrofloral record fails to capture evidence of a considerable population of coal forest lycopsids. We interpret our results as evidence that the Pennsylvanian dryland glacial landscape at Cottage Grove included fragmented populations of wetland plants living in refugia.

Submitted 16 September 2014

Accepted 30 September 2014

Published 4 November 2014

Corresponding author

Cindy V. Looy, looy@berkeley.edu

Academic editor

William DiMichele

Additional Information and  
Declarations can be found on  
page 12

DOI 10.7717/peerj.630

© Copyright  
2014 Looy et al.

Distributed under  
Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0

OPEN ACCESS

**Subjects** Ecology, Paleontology, Plant Science

**Keywords** Refugia, Pennsylvanian, Paleoecology, Vegetation reconstruction

## INTRODUCTION

The Pennsylvanian Subperiod of the Carboniferous (323–299 Ma) was characterized by a series of glacial–interglacial cycles that exerted profound control on the distribution of vegetation at this time (*Eros et al., 2012*). In particular, these cyclic climatic changes resulted in the alternating dominance of wetland and dryland vegetation in the Pennsylvanian tropics (*DiMichele, 2014*). The wetland vegetation of this time period is represented in the fossil record by the classic Pennsylvanian Coal Forests, which were

composed of arborescent lycopsids and, depending on the flooding regime, an understory of marattialean tree ferns, pteridosperms, sphenopsids and cordaitaleans (*DiMichele & Phillips, 1994; DiMichele, 2014*). In contrast, Pennsylvanian dryland vegetation is recorded by rare gymnosperm-dominated fossil assemblages, which contain drought-tolerant plants such as cordaitaleans, pteridosperms and walchian conifers (*Falcon-Lang et al., 2009; Dolby, Falcon-Lang & Gibling, 2011*). There is also evidence for the co-existence of wetland and dryland vegetation in at least regional proximity, reflected by fossil remains of dryland plants preserved alongside fossil wetland vegetation. These drier elements are thought to have been transported from upland (extrabasinal *sensu* *Pfefferkorn, 1980*) areas into wetland basins (e.g., *Gastaldo, 1987; Lyons & Darrah, 1989; Falcon-Lang & Bashforth, 2004; Gastaldo & Degges, 2007*).

A good example of Pennsylvanian dryland vegetation is the Moscovian age macroflora found at Cottage Grove Mine, Illinois (*Falcon-Lang et al., 2009*). This flora was discovered in fine siltstone layers closely associated with conglomeratic facies within a shallow channel, laterally equivalent to a calcic vertisol (indicating a seasonally dry climate) just below the Baker Coal in southeastern Illinois, USA (37°46'N, 88°25'W) (*Feldman et al., 2005; Falcon-Lang et al., 2009*). The Cottage Grove macroflora is composed mostly of cordaitaleans together with pteridosperms, walchian conifers, ferns and sphenopsids, and lacks classic Coal Forest plants such as lycopsids (*Falcon-Lang et al., 2009*). The small size of the channel (~250 m wide) and locally derived channel fill indicates that the drainage area was relatively small (*Feldman et al., 2005*). The plant macrofossils (leaves and other vegetative and reproductive structures) at Cottage Grove are associated with locally derived conglomerate and this, together with information on channel morphology, is interpreted as evidence that the macrofossils represent local vegetation growing on interfluvies, close to the depositional environment (*Falcon-Lang et al., 2009*).

There is currently no palynological data from the same stratigraphic horizons as the plant macrofossils that are preserved at Cottage Grove (*Falcon-Lang et al., 2009*). Reconstructions of the standing vegetation at this locality therefore lack the complementary data that can be provided by sporomorphs (prepollen, pollen, megaspores and spores) (e.g., *Chaloner, 1968; Gastaldo et al., 1998; Jackson & Booth, 2007; Mander, Kürschner & McElwain, 2010*). To address this deficit, we have undertaken a palynological investigation of the macrofossil-bearing shale found within the conglomeratic channel facies at Cottage Grove. This shale, and the sampled interval, is important because it was not deposited in association with widespread wetland environments typical of peat forming portions of glacial-interglacial cycles. Our results highlight considerable differences between the macrofossil and sporomorph records at Cottage Grove. Notably, our study reveals a population of 17 species of lycopsids from the orders Isoetales, Lepidodendrales and Selaginallales that flourished at Cottage Grove, but is entirely absent from the macrofossil record at this locality. Consequently, suggestions that Pennsylvanian dryland vegetation at Cottage Grove was dominated by xerophytic plants and devoid of wetland taxa such as lycopsids (*Falcon-Lang et al., 2009*) are incompatible with our palynological data. We interpret the discrepancy between the macrofossil and sporomorph records at Cottage

Grove as evidence that the Pennsylvanian dryland interglacial landscape in this region included fragmented populations of wetland plants living in refugia.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plant macrofossils at Cottage Grove are preserved in fine-grained siltstones in close association with conglomeratic layers ([Falcon-Lang et al., 2009](#)). We have analyzed the palynological composition of two samples from sediments containing a conifer macrofossil that occurred in a layer sandwiched between channel-bottom siltstones and conglomeratic deposits (lithologically unit 6a at the Cottage Grove locality; see Fig. 2A of [Falcon-Lang et al., 2009](#)). We have taken a palynological sample from the sediments (Sample 1) in which the conifer macrofossil (USNM 536629; see Fig. 3 of [Falcon-Lang et al., 2009](#)) was embedded, and a palynological sample of the counterpart surface (Sample 2). This means that the deposition of the two samples was temporally separated by less than the amount of time it would have taken for the deposited conifer remains to decay. Sample 2 originated from a slightly darker area on the counterpart surface of the same conglomeratic unit.

The sample was bulk macerated using hydrofluoric and hydrochloric acid, and the remaining organic residue was processed at the Laboratory of Palynology and Palaeobotany, Utrecht University, according to palynological techniques (heavy liquid separation and sieving over 15 µm mesh). The samples were not sieved over 250 µm mesh. This will be addressed later. The organic residue was mounted in glycerin jelly. The two samples were screened for identifiable sporomorphs, and a count of 433 (Sample 1) and 300 (Sample 2) sporomorphs was performed at the species level. Additional slides from the two samples were then screened for rare species. Two additional rare taxa were recorded in this process. Taxonomic descriptions by [Smith & Butterworth \(1967\)](#), [Ravn \(1979\)](#) and [Ravn \(1986\)](#) were used for identification. A list of sporomorph taxa, their botanical affinities, and their relative abundances in each of the two samples were compiled ([Table 1](#), [Table S1](#)).

## RESULTS

The sporomorph assemblage of Sample 1 is dominated by characteristic Middle Pennsylvanian wetland taxa ([Table 1](#)). Spores of arborescent lycopsids (e.g., *Cadiospora*, *Lycospora* spp., *Granaspores*) make up the majority of the assemblage (60.8%), with fern spores (16.9%) and cordaitalean prepollen (*Florinites* spp., 15.5%) as the other major components ([Fig. 1](#)). Notable occurrences include *Lycospora granulata*, which was produced by the highly specialized wetland arborescent lycopsid *Lepidophloios hallii* ([DiMichele, 2014](#)), and represents 15.2% of the total sporomorph assemblage. Sub-arborescent lycopsids are represented by low numbers of *Endosporites*, *Radiizonates* and *Cristatisporites*. Spores that have been found *in situ* herbaceous lycopods (*Cirratriradites* spp.) are rare elements. Sample 1 also contains the spores of a variety of ferns, including marattialean tree ferns (*Cyclogranisporites*, *Thymospora*, *Punctatosporites*, and *Latosporites*) as well as spores of sub-arborescent *Calamites* (*Calamospora*) and smaller-sized Sphenophyllales. Cordaitaleans are represented by four *Florinites* species, of which *F. mediapudens* is the most abundant (10.6%). Prepollen of other seed plants, such as medullosan prepollen



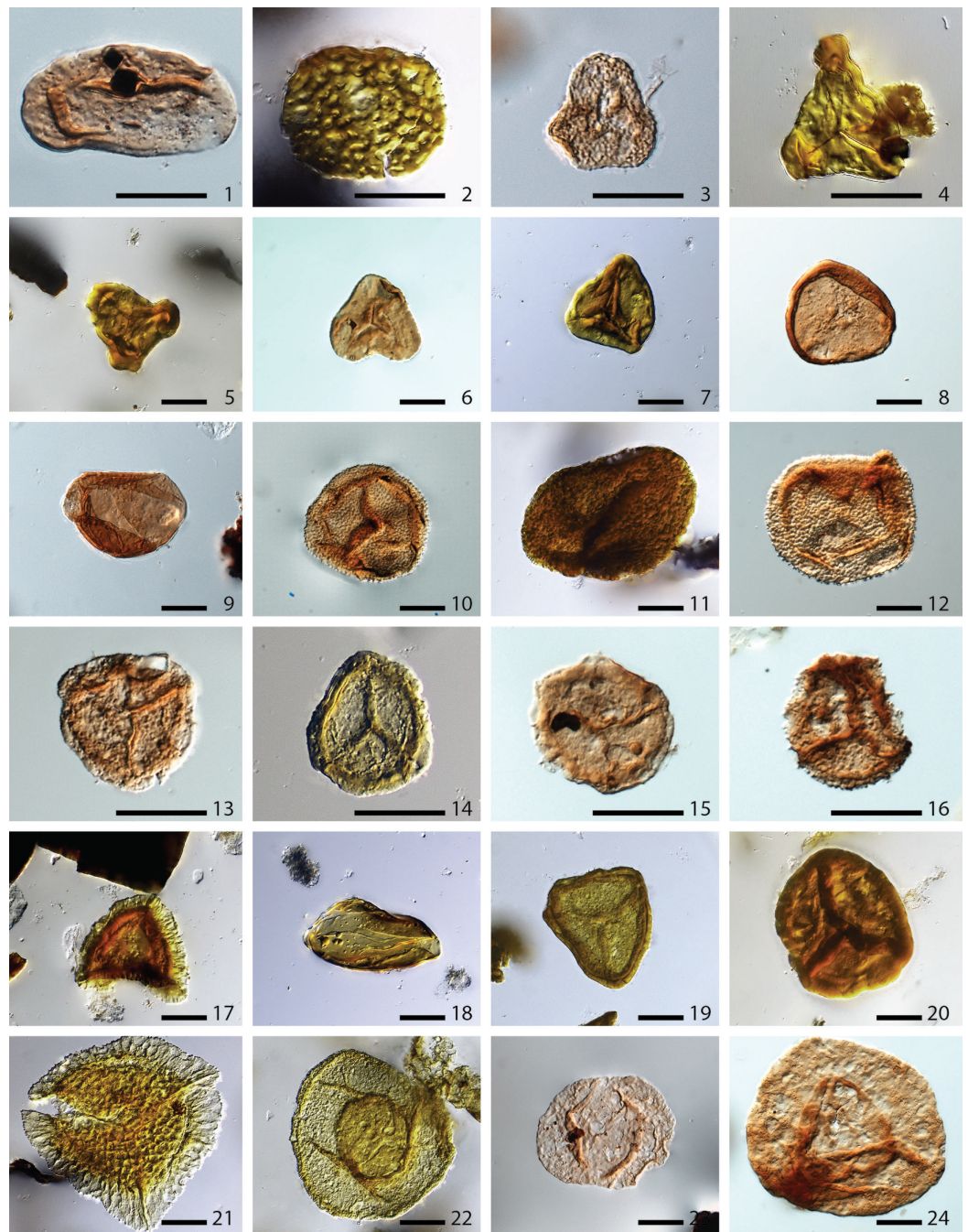
**Table 1 Botanical affinity pollen and spores.** Pollen and spores recovered from Cottage Grove plant locality, Cottage Grove Mine, southeast Illinois, together with their botanical affinity. The assignments to major taxonomic groups are based on information in a synthesis (Balme, 1995) and articles covering the same time interval and floral realm (Bashforth et al., 2011; Dimitrova, Cleal & Thomas, 2005; Dimitrova, Cleal & Thomas, 2011; Dolby, Falcon-Lang & Gibling, 2011; Eble, Greb & Williams, 2001; Van Hoof et al., 2013). The plus signs indicate rare, isolated occurrences.

	Sample 1	Sample 2
<b>LYCOPSIDS</b>	<b>62.6%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>
<b>Isoetales</b>		
<b>Chaloneriaceae</b>		
<i>Endosporites globiformis</i> (Ibrahim) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	0.5%	0.0%
<i>Endosporites</i> sp. Wilson et Coe 1940	0.2%	0.0%
<i>Radiizonates tenuis</i> (Loose) Butterworth et Smith, 1964	0.2%	0.0%
<i>Cristatisporites indignabundus</i> (Loose) Staplin et Jansonius 1964	0.0%	+
<b>Lepidodendrales</b>		
<b>Diaphorodendraceae</b>		
<i>Granasporites medius</i> (Dybovd et Jachowicz) Ravn et al. 1986	1.4%	12.0%
<b>Lepidocarpaceae</b>		
<i>Cadiospora magna</i> Kosanke 1950	0.5%	0.3%
<i>Lycospora brevijuga</i> Bhardwaj 1957	0.0%	0.7%
<i>Lycospora brevis</i> Bhardwaj 1957	2.8%	0.0%
<i>Lycospora granulata</i> Kosanke 1950	15.2%	0.0%
<i>Lycospora parva</i> Kosanke 1950	0.0%	0.7%
<i>Lycospora pellucida</i> (Wicher) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	9.5%	0.0%
<i>Lycospora punctata</i> Kosanke 1950	1.4%	0.0%
<i>Lycospora pusilla</i> (Ibrahim) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	15.9%	0.0%
<i>Lycospora</i> sp. (Ibrahim) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	14.1%	0.0%
<b>Lepidodendraceae</b>		
<i>Crassispora kosankei</i> Potonié et Kremp 1955	0.0%	2.3%
<b>Selaginellales</b>		
<b>Selaginellaceae</b>		
<i>Cirratriradites annulatus</i> Kosanke 1950	0.5%	0.0%
<i>Cirratriradites annuliformis</i> (Kosanke et Brockaw) Kosanke 1950	0.5%	0.3%
<b>SPHENOPSIDS</b>	<b>4.4%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>
<b>Calamitales</b>		
<b>Calamitaceae</b>		
<i>Calamospora breviradiata</i> Kosanke 1950	0.0%	1.3%
<i>Calamospora microrugosa</i> (Ibrahim) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	0.0%	0.7%
<i>Calamospora parva</i> Guennel 1958	0.9%	0.7%
<b>Sphenophyllales</b>		
<i>Laevigatosporites minor</i> Loose 1934	3.0%	1.3%
<i>Vestispora pseudoreticulata</i> (Spode) Smith & Butterworth, 1967	0.5%	1.0%
<b>FERNS</b>	<b>16.9%</b>	<b>28.3%</b>
<b>Filicales</b>		
<i>Granulatisporites granulatus</i> Ibrahim 1933	1.2%	0.7%

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

	Sample 1	Sample 2
<b>Gleicheniaceae</b>		
<i>Triquitrites bransonii</i> Wilson et Hoffmeister 1956	3.2%	0.0%
<i>Triquitrites sculptilis</i> (Balme) <a href="#">Smith &amp; Butterworth, 1967</a>	2.8%	0.7%
<b>Botryopteridaceae</b>		
<i>Microreticulatisporites nobilis</i> (Wicher) Knox 1950	1.2%	0.3%
<b>Tedeaceae</b>		
<i>Raistrickia fulva</i> Artüz 1957	0.0%	0.3%
<i>Raistrickia irregularis</i> Kosanke 1950	0.0%	0.3%
<i>Raistrickia pilosa</i> Kosanke 1950	0.7%	0.3%
<b>Marattiales</b>		
<b>Marattiaceae</b>		
<i>Cyclogranisporites aureus</i> (Loose) Potonié et Kremp 1955	0.0%	5.3%
<i>Punctatosporites rotundus</i> Bhardwaj 1957	0.5%	0.0%
<i>Laevigatosporites globosus</i> Schemel 1951	+	0.0%
<i>Thymospora pseudothiessenii</i> (Kosanke) Wilson et Venkatachala 1963	3.0%	0.0%
<b>Psaroniaceae</b>		
<i>Latosporites minutus</i> Bhardwaj 1957	1.2%	0.0%
<b>Unknown ferns</b>		
<i>Deltoidospora levis</i> (Kosanke) <a href="#">Ravn, 1986</a>	0.0%	0.3%
<i>Deltoidospora ornata</i> (Ishchenko) Braman et Hills 1977	0.5%	0.3%
<i>Deltoidospora priddy</i> (Berry) McGregor 1973	0.0%	1.7%
<i>Deltoidospora tumida</i> (Butterworth et Williams) <a href="#">Ravn, 1986</a>	0.0%	0.2%
<i>Deltoidospora</i> sp. Miner 1935	0.5%	0.0%
<i>Dictyotrilites mediareticulatus</i> (Ibrahim) Potonié et Kremp 1955	0.0%	3.3%
<i>Granulatisporites adnatoides</i> (Potonié et Kremp) <a href="#">Smith &amp; Butterworth, 1967</a>	0.0%	0.3%
<i>Leiotrilites tumida</i> Butterworth et Williams 1958	0.2%	0.0%
<i>Mooreisporites inusitatus</i> (Kosanke) Neeves 1958	0.0%	0.3%
<i>Punctatosporites</i> sp. Ibrahim 1933	1.2%	0.0%
<i>Verrucosporites donarii</i> Potonié et Kremp 1956	0.2%	9.3%
<b>Zygopteridales</b>		
<b>Zygopteridaceae</b>		
<i>Verrucosporites verrucosus</i> Ibrahim 1933	0.7%	4.7%
<b>CORDAITES</b>	<b>15.5%</b>	<b>50.3%</b>
<b>Cordaitanthales</b>		
<b>Cordaitanthaceae</b>		
<i>Florenites</i> sp. Schopf, Wilson, et Bentall 1944	1.4%	0.0%
<i>Florinites florinii</i> Imgrund 1960	0.9%	1.7%
<i>Florinites mediapudens</i> (Loose) Potonié et Kremp 1956	10.6%	37.3%
<i>Florinites pumicosus</i> (Ibrahim) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	2.1%	9.0%
<i>Florinites visendus</i> (Ibrahim) Schopf, Wilson et Bentall 1944	0.5%	2.3%
<b>UNKNOWN AFFINITY</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>
cf. <i>Punctatisporites</i>	0.2%	0.0%
<i>Cheiledonites</i> sp. Doubinger 1957	0.2%	0.0%
<i>Cuneisporites rigidus</i> <a href="#">Ravn, 1979</a>	0.2%	0.0%



**Figure 1** Pollen and spores from Cottage Grove plant locality. Selected pollen and spores from Cottage Grove plant locality, Cottage Grove Mine, southeast Illinois. Specimen names are followed by USNM specimen numbers, slide code, and England Finder graticule coordinates. Scale bars are 20 μm. 1. *Laevigatosporites minor* (USNM 606400), E36-1. 2. *Thymospora pseudothiessenii* (USNM 606401), S34-3. 3. *Granulatisporites granulatus* (USNM 606402), H46-1. 4. *Triquirites bransonii* (USNM 606403), Y36. 5. *Triquirites sculptilis* (USNM 606404), T45. 6. *Deltoidospora priddyi* (USNM 606405), T18. 7. *Deltoidospora ornata* (USNM 606406), K41-4. 8. *Crassispota kosankei* (USNM 606407), Q39-3. 9. *Granasporites medius* (USNM 606408), K31. 10. *Cyclogranisporites aureus* (continued on next page...)

**Figure 1 (...continued)**

(USNM 606409), R15. **11.** *Verrucosiporites* (USNM 606410), Q34. **12.** *Verrucosiporites verrucosis* (USNM 606411), P30-2. **13.** *Lycospora brevis* (USNM 606412), U44-1. **14.** *Lycospora pusilla* (USNM 606413), Q46-3. **15.** *Lycospora* (USNM 606414), T33-2. **16.** *Lycospora granulata* (USNM 606415), M47-3. **17.** *Radiizonates tenuis* (USNM 606416), U35. **18.** *Cheiledonites* sp. (USNM 606417), P33-2. **19.** *Cuneisporites rigidus* (USNM 606418), J49-2. **20.** *Cadiospora magna* (USNM 606419), Q38-1. **21.** *Cirratriradites annulatus* (USNM 606420), T34-1. **22.** *Endosporites globiformis* (USNM 606421), Q48-1. **23.** *Florinites mediapudens* (USNM 606422), M25-4. **24.** *Florinites pumicosus* (USNM 606423), V41.

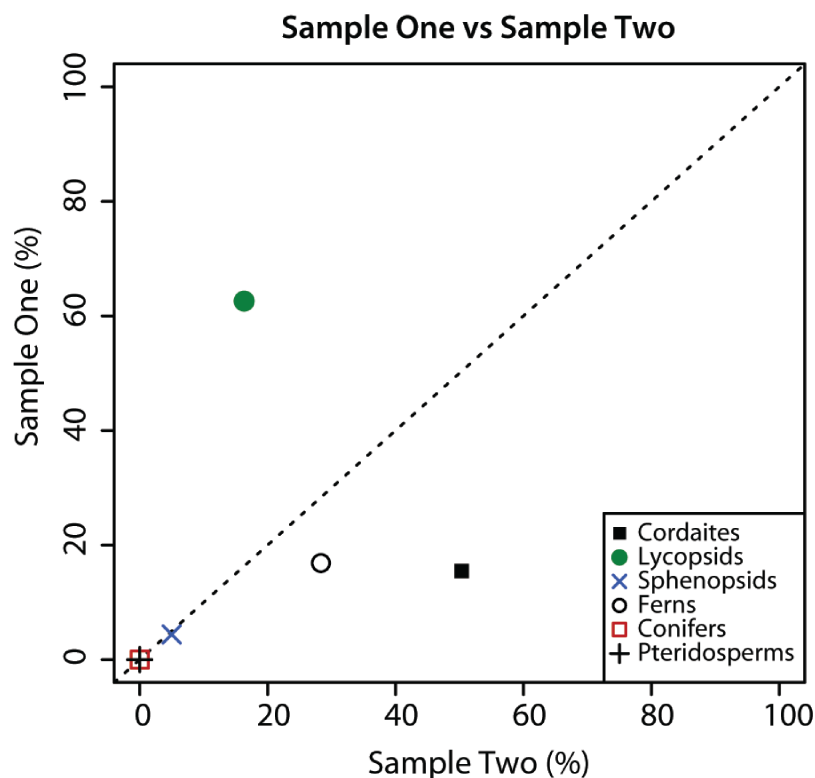
(*Schoppipollenites*), walchian conifer prepollen (*Potoniesporites*), or other pseudosaccates or bisaccates are absent from among the ~1,500 palynomorphs that have been scanned. The diversity of this sample is 39, and its evenness is 0.76.

In Sample 2, the cordaitalean prepollen *Florinites* dominates the sporomorph assemblage (50.3%), while spores of ferns (28.3%) and arborescent lycopsids (16.0%) are also abundant (Fig. 1). In this sample, *Granasporites medius* is the only abundant spore produced by the Lepidodendrales. Sigillarian lycopsid spores (*Crassisporea kosankei*) are common, and spores of herbaceous lycopsids (*Cirratriradites*) are rare in this sample. Marattialean tree ferns are represented by *Cyclogranisporites* (5.3%), and sub-arborescent *Calamites* is represented by *Calamospora*. Spores of other ferns and the smaller-sized Sphenophyllales are present, but in low numbers. Prepollen produced by other seed plants, conifers and seed ferns, is not present in this sample. The diversity of this sample is 32, and its evenness is 0.69.

### Comparison of samples

The sporomorph assemblage of Samples 1 and 2 are composed of the same plant groups, but the relative abundance of these groups in the two samples is substantially different (Fig. 2). Although sphenopsid spores are a minor component of sporomorph assemblages in Samples 1 and 2, cordaitaleans and ferns are much more abundant in Sample 2 than in Sample 1, and lycopsids are considerably more abundant in Sample 1 than in Sample 2 (Fig. 2). There are also major differences in the species-level composition of the two samples. For example, of the 54 sporomorph species that were recorded in the two samples, just 17 are present in both (Table 1), and a Sorensen's index comparison of Sample 1 and Sample 2 returns a value of 0.48 (Table 2) ( $SI = 20C/[A + B]$ , where C is the number of species in common between two samples, and A and B are the total number of species in each of the two samples (McElwain et al., 2007)). These differences are surprising given the stratigraphic proximity of Sample 1 and Sample 2. Sample 2, however, originated from a slightly darker area on the counterpart surface of the same conglomeratic unit, and it is possible that this reflects subtle differences in the taphonomic conditions of the two samples. Factors that could create compositional differences between the two samples include the hydrodynamic regime (Havinga, 1967), the degree of oxidation or microbial activity, and the action of wet and dry cycles (Campbell & Campbell, 1994; see Mander et al., 2012 for a review).





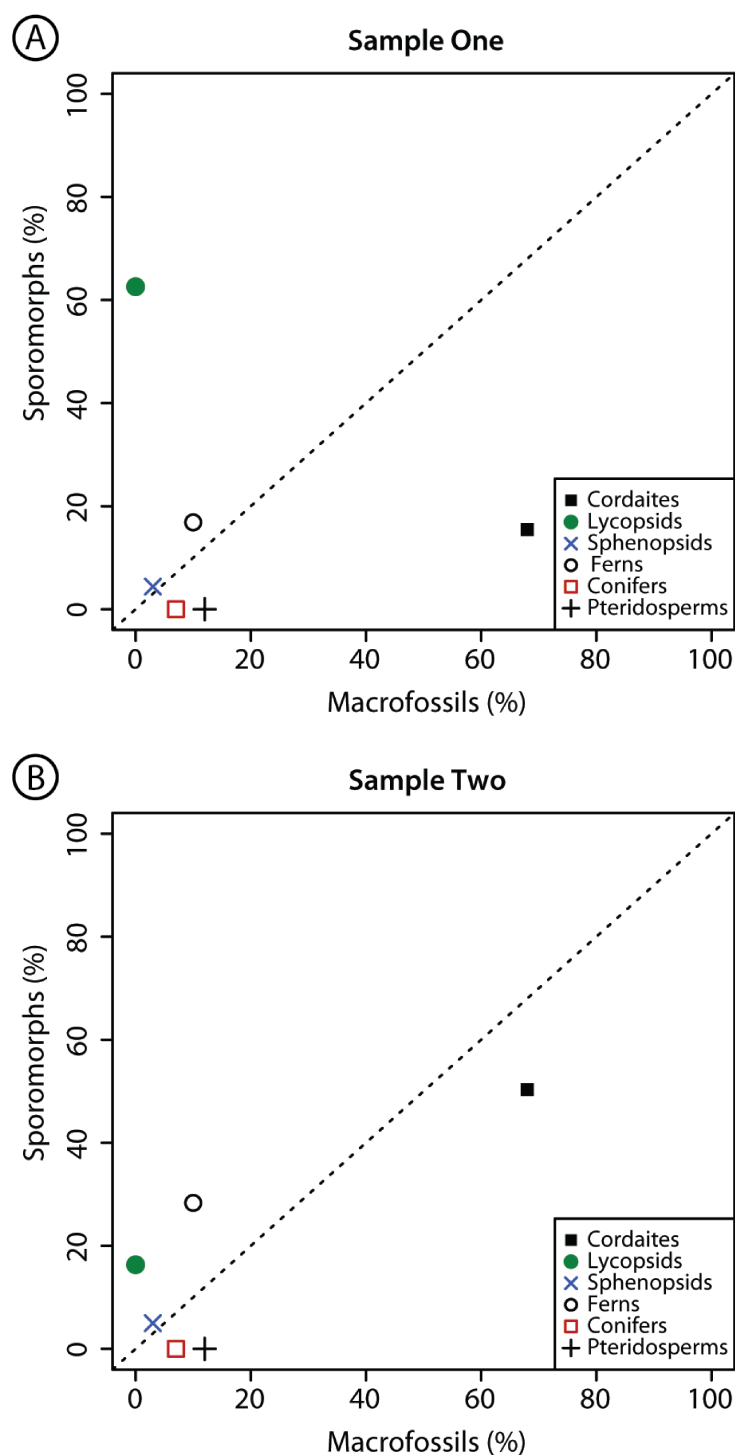
**Figure 2** Composition of palynological Sample 1 and 2. Graphical comparison of the composition of palynological Sample 1 and Sample 2 from Cottage Grove plant locality, Cottage Grove Mine, southeast Illinois. Dashed diagonal line represents a line of equality. Major plant groups from Table 2.

**Table 2** Abundance major plant groups in macrofossil and sporomorph assemblages. Relative abundance of major plant groups in the macrofossil and sporomorph records at the Cottage Grove plant locality, Cottage Grove Mine, southeast Illinois. See Table 1 for count data.

Plant group	Macrofossils (%)	Sample One (%)	Sample Two (%)
Cordaites	68.3	15.5	50.3
Lycopsids	0.0	62.6	16.3
Sphenopsids	2.4	4.4	5.0
Ferns	9.8	16.9	28.3
Conifers	7.3	0.0	0.0
Pteridosperms	12.2	0.0	0.0

### Comparison of sporomorph and macrofossil assemblages at Cottage Grove

There are considerable differences in the relative abundance of the plant groups that are present as sporomorphs in Samples 1 and 2 and the plant groups that are present as macrofossils at the same locality (Fig. 3; Table 2). Cordaitaleans, dominating the macroflora, are less abundant in the sporomorph record at Cottage Grove. This difference is particularly striking in Sample 1, in which sporomorphs produced by cordaitaleans



**Figure 3 Comparison composition macrofossil and sporomorph assemblages.** Graphical comparison of the composition of macrofossil (leaves and other vegetative and reproductive structures) and sporomorph assemblages at Cottage Grove plant locality, Cottage Grove Mine, southeast Illinois. Dashed diagonal line represents a line of equality. Major plant groups from Table 2.

represent just 15.5% of the total sum (Fig. 3; Table 2). Lycopoid spores are major components of the sporomorph record at Cottage Grove, comprising 62.6% of the total sum in Sample 1, but this plant group is absent from the macrofossil record at this locality (Fig. 3; Table 2). Ferns are also more abundant in the sporomorph record than the macrofossil record at Cottage Grove, while sphenopsids are a minor component of both the sporomorph and macrofossil records at this locality (Fig. 3; Table 2). Walchian conifers and medullosan pteridosperms comprise ~7% and 12% of the identifiable macrofossils recovered from sediments at Cottage Grove, but prepollen produced by these two plant groups is completely absent from both palynological samples (Fig. 3; Table 2).

## DISCUSSION

This comparison of the macrofossil and sporomorph records at Cottage Grove builds upon previous comparisons of these two fossil groups in the Carboniferous (e.g., Mahaffy, 1988; Willard, 1993; DiMichele & Phillips, 1994), and emphasizes that they provide very different pictures of the standing vegetation at a given locality (e.g., Chaloner, 1968; Gastaldo et al., 1998; Jackson & Booth, 2007; Mander, Kürschner & McElwain, 2010). Especially the absence of prepollen of medullosan pteridosperms (e.g., *Schopffipollenites* and *Monoletes*) and walchian conifers (*Potonieisporites*) in Cottage Grove's palynological samples is striking. It has been suggested that certain differences between the pictures provided by each fossil group may be explained by palynological processing techniques. For example, large (>200 µm) prepollen referable to medullosan pteridosperms can be inadvertently removed from palynological preparations by sieving over coarse mesh (DiMichele & Phillips, 1994). However, our samples were only sieved over 15 µm mesh, not 200–250 µm mesh as is standard in some palynological processing protocols. Therefore, in contrast to previous suggestions (DiMichele & Phillips, 1994), sieving cannot explain why these plants are present in the macrofossil record at Cottage Grove (Falcon-Lang et al., 2009), but entirely absent from our palynological samples from the same sediments (Fig. 3; Tables 2 and 1). It is possible that our samples, which are derived from very thin siltstone horizons, represent very brief intervals of geological time in which there was no conifer pollen being produced by plants in the source vegetation.

Other differences between the macrofossil and sporomorph records of vegetation at Cottage Grove could be explained by the different ways in which macrofossils and sporomorphs are representative of the standing vegetation, in terms of composition, dominance and spatial scale. In general, macrofossil assemblages are typically weighted towards plants of large stature that produce a considerable number of potential fossils that may disperse widely (e.g., Spicer, 1989; Greenwood, 1991; Gastaldo, 2001). In addition, parautochthonous macrofossil assemblages will tend to be strongly biased toward those plants living in close proximity to the environment of deposition (Scheihing & Pfefferkorn, 1984; Burnham, Wing & Parker, 1992). In contrast, sporomorph assemblages are weighted towards taxa with high sporomorph productivity and/or taxa that produce sporomorphs that are deposited slowly from the atmosphere (Prentice, 1985). Sporomorphs also can be carried longer distances from source areas by water than is typical for foliage, and certain



depositional settings, such as large lakes, therefore may have a significant extra-local elements not represented among the macrofossils (Farley, 1990).

In addition to the absence of conifer and pteridosperm prepollen, there is a distinct mismatch between cordaitalean abundance in the Cottage Grove macro and microfloras. The dominance of *Cordaites* leaves in the macrofossil assemblages at Cottage Grove (Falcon-Lang et al., 2009; Fig. 3; Table 2) may be partially a taphonomic bias, reflecting their robust, “leathery” construction (Stewart & Rothwell, 1993, p. 400). Their morphology made them differentially resistant to destruction, particularly if carried in relatively coarse, bed-load sediment. There are suggestions of a counter bias with regard to cordaitalean pollen. Comparison of macrofossil and sporomorph assemblages in Westphalian Coals indicated that sporomorphs produced by cordaitaleans were under-represented relative to macrofossils of the same genus (DiMichele & Phillips, 1994), an observation consistent with our data (Fig. 3; Table 2).

The opposite of the walthian conifer and medullosan pteridosperm pattern is that of the lycopsids. The microfossil-macrofossil mismatch in terms of lycopsid abundance in Cottage Grove Sample 1 (Fig. 3) only partially reflects the high abundance of three *Lycospora* species in sporomorph sample (Table 1). Over-representation of *Lycospora* relative to macrofossil estimates of parent-plant abundances also matches comparisons from Westphalian coals (DiMichele & Phillips, 1994). The relative over-representation of lycopsids in Sample 2 from Cottage Grove (Fig. 3; Table 2), however, is mainly due to the high abundance of *Granisporites* in this sample (Table 1). This is unexpected because *Granisporites* is thought to be under-represented in sporomorph assemblages due to low spore productivity by the parent plants, *Diaphorodendron* and *Synchysidendron* (DiMichele & Phillips, 1994). This may indicate that some results from macrofossil–sporomorph comparisons in peats and coal balls (e.g., DiMichele & Phillips, 1994) cannot be generalized, but it is more likely that there were cryptic populations of *Granisporites* producing plants nearby on the landscape.

### Implications for the dynamics of Pennsylvanian tropical lowland vegetation

Our palynological data indicate that the macrofossil record fails to sample a considerable population of lycopsids at Cottage Grove (Fig. 3; Table 2). This population comprises a total of 17 species (Table 1) and represents between ~16% (Sample 2) and ~63% (Sample 1) of the total sporomorph assemblages at this locality (Table 2). As a consequence of the abundance and diversity of this population, we rule out reworking of sporomorphs as a primary cause for the difference between the macrofossil and sporomorph records at Cottage Grove. This population includes *Lycospora granulata*, a spore produced by the highly specialized wetland arborescent lycopsid *Lepidophloios hallii* (DiMichele, 2014), and indicates that wetland plants were present on the seasonally dry landscape near Cottage Grove. A seasonally dry climate at Cottage Grove cannot be inferred from the dominance of cordaitaleans alone, since this group of plants has broad environmental affinities. However, the macrofossil assemblage at Cottage Grove is devoid of lowland

wetland plants and contains drought-tolerant waldchian conifers ([Falcon-Lang et al., 2009](#)). Additionally, the Cottage Grove channel deposit is located within a paleosol interval. It is entirely encased in, and formed lateral to and contemporaneously with a calcic vertisol below the Baker coal bed ([Falcon-Lang et al., 2009](#)), which indicates that the climate regime was characterized by sufficient evapotranspiration to result in carbonate deposition within the soil. This paleobotanical and geological evidence together supports the idea that the Pennsylvanian interglacial climate at Cottage Grove was seasonally dry.

The exact geographic location of wetland plants at Cottage Grove cannot be determined from our data. Sporomorphs can be transported considerable distances by wind and water ([Prentice, 1985](#); [Sugita, 1993](#); [Hofmann, 2002](#)), so it is possible that they were present in sites some distance from the interfluvies on which the local vegetation is thought to have grown ([Falcon-Lang et al., 2009](#)). In the context of Pennsylvanian glacial–interglacial cycles ([Eros et al., 2012](#)), we suggest that the wetland taxa in our palynological analysis represent the survival of these plants in refugia during the seasonally dry parts of glacial–interglacial cycles. This supports the idea of the Pennsylvanian Coal Forest as a dynamic biome expanding, contracting and fragmenting in concert with changes in the prevailing climate ([Falcon-Lang & DiMichele, 2010](#); [DiMichele, 2014](#)). Such refugia are likely to have been spatially discontinuous, small, wet areas such as inland swamps, waterside habitats, and coastal wetlands ([DiMichele, 2014](#)), or dry season waterholes ([Bashforth et al., 2014](#)).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Scott Elrick and Cortland Eble are thanked for their constructive review. This is University of California Museum of Paleontology Contribution number 2057.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND DECLARATIONS

### Funding

Cindy Looy was supported by the Hellman Family Foundation. Robert Stevenson received a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship to work on this project. Luke Mander was supported by a Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme (PIIF-GA-2012-328245). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

### Grant Disclosures

The following grant information was disclosed by the authors:

Hellman Family Foundation.

Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship.

Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship, 7th European Community Framework Programme: PIIF-GA-2012-328245.

### Competing Interests

Thomas B. VanHoof is an employee of TNO-Petroleum Geosciences.

## Author Contributions

- Cindy V. Looy conceived and designed the experiments, analyzed the data, contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools, wrote the paper.
- Robert A. Stevenson performed the experiments, analyzed the data, prepared figures and/or tables, reviewed drafts of the paper.
- Thomas B. Van Hoof reviewed drafts of the paper, taxonomy pollen and spores.
- Luke Mander wrote the paper.

## Supplemental Information

Supplemental information for this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.7717/peerj.630#supplemental-information>.

## REFERENCES

- Balme BE. 1995.** Fossil *in situ* spores and pollen grains: an annotated catalogue. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* **87**:81–323 DOI [10.1016/0034-6667\(95\)93235-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0034-6667(95)93235-X).
- Bashforth AR, Cleal CJ, Gibling MR, Falcon-Lang HJ, Miller RF. 2014.** Paleoeecology of Early Pennsylvanian vegetation on a seasonally dry tropical landscape (Tynemouth Creek Formation, New Brunswick, Canada). *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* **200**:229–263 DOI [10.1016/j.revpalbo.2013.09.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.revpalbo.2013.09.006).
- Bashforth AR, Opluštil S, Drábková J, Gibling MR, Falcon-Lang HJ. 2011.** Landscape gradients and patchiness in riparian vegetation on a Middle Pennsylvanian braided-river plain prone to flood disturbance (Nýřany Member, Central and Western Bohemian Basin, Czech Republic). *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* **163**:153–189 DOI [10.1016/j.revpalbo.2010.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.revpalbo.2010.10.001).
- Burnham RJ, Wing SL, Parker GG. 1992.** The reflection of deciduous forest communities in leaf litter: implications for autochthonous litter assemblages from the fossil record. *Paleobiology* **18**:30–49.
- Campbell ID, Campbell C. 1994.** Pollen preservation: experimental wet-dry cycles in saline and desiccated sediments. *Palynology* **18**:5–10 DOI [10.1080/01916122.1994.9989434](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916122.1994.9989434).
- Chaloner WG. 1968.** The paleoeecology of fossil spores. In: Drake ET, ed. *Evolution and environment*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 125–138.
- DiMichele WA. 2014.** Wetland-dryland vegetational dynamics in the Pennsylvanian ice age tropics. *International Journal of Plant Sciences* **175**:123–164 DOI [10.1086/675235](https://doi.org/10.1086/675235).
- DiMichele WA, Phillips TL. 1994.** Paleobotanical and paleoeecological constraints on models of peat formation in the Late Carboniferous of Euramerica. *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoeecology* **106**:39–90 DOI [10.1016/0031-0182\(94\)90004-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0031-0182(94)90004-3).
- Dimitrova TK, Cleal CJ, Thomas BA. 2005.** Palynology of late Westphalian-early Stephanian coal-bearing deposits in the eastern South Wales Coalfield. *Geological Magazine* **142**:809–821 DOI [10.1017/S001675680500107X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S001675680500107X).
- Dimitrova T, Cleal CJ, Thomas BA. 2011.** Palynological evidence for Pennsylvanian extra-basinal vegetation in Atlantic Canada. *Journal of the Geological Society London* **168**:559–569 DOI [10.1144/0016-76492010-028](https://doi.org/10.1144/0016-76492010-028).
- Dolby G, Falcon-Lang HJ, Gibling MR. 2011.** A conifer-dominated palynological assemblage from Pennsylvanian (late Moscovian) alluvial drylands in Atlantic Canada: implications for the vegetation of tropical lowlands during glacial phases. *Journal of the Geological Society London* **168**:571–584 DOI [10.1144/0016-76492010-061](https://doi.org/10.1144/0016-76492010-061).

- Eble CF, Greb SF, Williams DA. 2001.** The geology and palynology of Lower and Middle Pennsylvanian strata in the Western Kentucky Coal Field. *International Journal of Coal Geology* 47:189–206 DOI 10.1016/S0166-5162(01)00042-8.
- Eros JM, Montañez IP, Osleger DA, Davydov VI, Nemyrovska TI, Poletaev VI, Zhykalyak MV. 2012.** Sequence stratigraphy and onlap history of the Donets Basin, Ukraine: insight into Carboniferous icehouse dynamics. *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 313–314:1–25 DOI 10.1016/j.palaeo.2011.08.019.
- Falcon-Lang HJ, Bashforth AR. 2004.** Pennsylvanian uplands were forested by giant cordaitalean trees. *Geology* 32:417–420 DOI 10.1130/G20371.1.
- Falcon-Lang HJ, DiMichele WA. 2010.** What happened to the coal forests during Pennsylvanian glacial phases? *Palaaios* 25:611–617 DOI 10.2110/palo.2009.p09-162r.
- Falcon-Lang HJ, Nelson J, Elrick S, Looy CV, Ames P, DiMichele WA. 2009.** Incised channel-fills containing conifers imply that seasonally-dry vegetation dominated Pennsylvanian tropical lowlands. *Geology* 37:923–926 DOI 10.1130/G30117A.1.
- Farley MB. 1990.** Vegetation distribution across the early Eocene depositional landscape from palynological analysis. *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 79:11–27 DOI 10.1016/0031-0182(90)90103-E.
- Feldman HR, Franseen EK, Joeckel RM, Heckel PH. 2005.** Impact of longer-term modest climate shifts on architecture of high-frequency sequences (cyclothems), Pennsylvanian of mid-continent USA. *Journal of Sedimentary Research* 75:350–368 DOI 10.2110/jsr.2005.028.
- Gastaldo RA. 1987.** Confirmation of Carboniferous clastic swamp communities. *Nature* 326:869–871 DOI 10.1038/326869a0.
- Gastaldo RA. 2001.** Plant taphonomy. In: Briggs DEG, Crowther PR, eds. *Paleobiology II*. Oxford: Blackwell Science, 314–317.
- Gastaldo RA, Degges CW. 2007.** Sedimentology and paleontology of a Carboniferous log jam. *International Journal of Coal Geology* 69:103–118 DOI 10.1016/j.coal.2006.02.011.
- Gastaldo RA, Riegel W, Püttmann W, Linnemann UG, Zetter R. 1998.** A multidisciplinary approach to reconstruct the Late Oligocene vegetation in central Europe. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* 101:71–94 DOI 10.1016/S0034-6667(97)00070-5.
- Greenwood DR. 1991.** The taphonomy of plant macrofossils. In: Donovan SK, ed. *The processes of fossilization*. London: Belhaven Press, 141–169.
- Havinga AJ. 1967.** Palynology and pollen preservation. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* 2:81–98 DOI 10.1016/0034-6667(67)90138-8.
- Hofmann C-C. 2002.** Pollen distribution in sub-Recent sedimentary environments of the Orinoco Delta (Venezuela)—an actuo-palaeobotanical study. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* 119:191–217 DOI 10.1016/S0034-6667(01)00141-5.
- Jackson ST, Booth RT. 2007.** Validation of pollen studies. In: Elias SA, ed. *Encyclopaedia of quaternary sciences*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 2413–2422.
- Lyons PC, Darrah WC. 1989.** Earliest conifers of North America: upland and/or paleoclimatic indicators? *Palaaios* 4:480–486 DOI 10.2307/3514592.
- Mahaffy JF. 1988.** Vegetational history of the Springfield coal bed (Middle Pennsylvanian of Illinois) and distribution patterns of a tree-fern miospore, *Thymospora pseudothiessenii*, based on miospore profiles. *International Journal of Coal Geology* 10:239–260 DOI 10.1016/0166-5162(88)90021-3.

- Mander L, Kürschner WM, McElwain JC. 2010.** An explanation for conflicting records of Triassic–Jurassic plant diversity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* **107**:5351–15356 DOI [10.1073/pnas.1004207107](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1004207107).
- Mander L, Wesseln CJ, McElwain JC, Punyasena SW. 2012.** Tracking taphonomic regimes using chemical and mechanical damage of pollen and spores: an example from the Triassic–Jurassic mass extinction. *PLoS ONE* **7**:e49153 DOI [10.1371/journal.pone.0049153](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0049153).
- McElwain JC, Popp ME, Hesselbo SP, Haworth M, Surlyk F. 2007.** Macroecological responses of terrestrial vegetation to climatic and atmospheric change across the Triassic/Jurassic boundary in East Greenland. *Paleobiology* **33**:547–573 DOI [10.1666/06026.1](https://doi.org/10.1666/06026.1).
- Pfefferkorn HW. 1980.** A note on the term “upland flora”. *Review of Paleobotany and Palynology* **30**:157–158 DOI [10.1016/0034-6667\(80\)90011-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0034-6667(80)90011-1).
- Prentice IC. 1985.** Pollen representation, source area, and basin size: toward a unified theory of pollen analysis. *Quaternary Research* **23**:76–86 DOI [10.1016/0033-5894\(85\)90073-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0033-5894(85)90073-0).
- Ravn RL. 1979.** An introduction to the stratigraphic palynology of the Cherokee Group (Pennsylvanian) coals of Iowa. *Iowa Geological Survey Technical Paper* **6**:1–117.
- Ravn RL. 1986.** Palynostratigraphy of the Lower and Middle Pennsylvanian coals of Iowa. *Iowa Geological Survey Technical Paper* **7**:1–245.
- Scheihing MH, Pfefferkorn HW. 1984.** The taphonomy of land plants in the Orinoco Delta: a model for the incorporation of plant parts in clastic sediments of Late Carboniferous age of Euramerica. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* **41**:205–280 DOI [10.1016/0034-6667\(84\)90047-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0034-6667(84)90047-2).
- Smith AHV, Butterworth MA. 1967.** *Miospores in the coal seams of the Carboniferous of Great Britain, Special papers in palaeontology*, Vol. 1. London: The Palaeontological Association.
- Spicer RA. 1989.** The formation and interpretation of plant fossil assemblages. *Advances in Botanical Research* **16**:95–191.
- Stewart WN, Rothwell GW. 1993.** *Paleobotany and the evolution of plants*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sugita S. 1993.** A model of pollen source area for an entire lake surface. *Quaternary Research* **39**:239–244 DOI [10.1006/qres.1993.1027](https://doi.org/10.1006/qres.1993.1027).
- Van Hoof TB, Falcon-Lang HJ, Hartkopf-Fröder C, Kerp H. 2013.** Conifer-dominated palynofloras in the Middle Pennsylvanian strata of the De Lutte-6 borehole, The Netherlands: implications for evolution, palaeoecology and biostratigraphy. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* **188**:18–37 DOI [10.1016/j.revpalbo.2012.09.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.revpalbo.2012.09.003).
- Willard DA. 1993.** Vegetational patterns in the Springfield coal bed (Middle Pennsylvanian, Illinois Basin): comparison of miospore and coal-ball records. Cobb JC, Cecil CB, eds. Modern and ancient coal-forming environments, *Geological society of America special papers* **286**:139–152.